DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 383 022 CS 508 931

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TITLE Students as Customers: A Mangled Managerial Metaphor.
PUB DATE Oct 95
NOTE 32p.; Paper presented at the Carolinas Speech Communication Association Convention (Charlotte, NC, October 13-14, 1995).
PUB TYPE Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Information Analyses (070) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *College Students; Discourse Analysis; Educational Trends; *Higher Education; *Language Role; *Metaphors; Rhetorical Criticism; School Business Relationship; *Student Needs; *Total Quality Management
IDENTIFIERS *Educational Issues

ABSTRACT

Greater reflexivity concerning the ways of discussing pedagogy could improve the way educators conceptualize their roles. Close attention to metaphors about education sounds a note of caution about the transfer of language from one discursive realm (business) to another (education). The transference of the "total quality management" (TQM) vocabulary, complete with the identification of students as customers, from business to education occurred when widespread problems with American education gained public attention. The pressures of competition among colleges and between the United States and foreign countries resounded in educational circles about 1990. Although the treatment of students as customers has advantages for streamlining some operations, education involves an ongoing process heavily dependent on the student's willingness to participate in learning. Cognitively rich metaphors do not arise from merely substituting one term for another, and the incompatibilities between the business realm and the educational realm render the application of consumer metaphors to education problematic. Meeting every "customer's" standard, moreover, requires negotiation and compromise because not everyone shares the definition of what constitutes a high quality education. Universal satisfaction presumes that standards and expectations of quality will be uniform for all constituencies and that none of these needs will conflict. Literature on TQM in educational settings equivocates when discussing a user-based definition of quality. TQM has already been implemented successfully at several universities, and money has been saved. Students still deserve more from educators, however, than immediate gratification. (Contains 39 references.) (NKA)

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Students as Customers: A Mangled Managerial Metaphor

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Paper presented at the
Carolinas Speech Communication Association Convention
October 13-14, 1995
Charlotte, North Carolina

CS509731

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Students as Customers: A Mangled Managerial Metaphor

As teachers, we encourage our students to examine their communicative practices. Too often, we invoke diplomatic immunity to this recommendation and avoid subjecting our own pedagogical methods to rhetorical analysis. The series of essays that follow turns the educator's eye inward, examining the way educators communicate about education. Greater reflexivity concerning the ways of discussing pedagogy shape perceptions about education could improve the way we conceptualize our roles as educators. Herein lies the central concern of this forum. More important, self-examination could improve the quality of education by revealing the assumptions that guide interactions with students. As self-awareness of our use of language increases, we become more conscious of the educational atmosphere we create and foster by the linguistic choices we make. Central to these choices is the employment of metaphors to describe what occurs in educational settings.

Aside from the virtue of self-examination, closer attention to metaphors about education sounds a note of caution about the transfer of language from one discursive realm (in this case, business) to another (in this case, education). Any transference of a metaphor carries residual semiotic baggage from its context of origin into the context of application. The application of the quality management philosophy has been likened to colonization of education by a (not necessarily benign) power—i.e., business—that seeks to impose "a foreign worldview" (Baldwin, 1994, p. 125). Such colonization is sometimes welcomed. For example, Oregon State was one of the first universities to embrace quality management, and its participants sing its praises (Coate, 1993). At issue here is not the

success of management principles in campus operations, but the compatibility of the language and assumptions of business with the practice and goals of education.

The Application of Management Theory to Education

The first sentence in a recent book describing the application of Total Quality Management (TQM) to higher education makes a remarkable claim: "Problems in American higher education can be directly attributed to the lack of vision, lack of insight, and the lack of skill of many administrators who lacked any formal, even informal, management training" (Cornesky et al., 1992, p. 7). The implications are clear. Training in management will solve problems in higher education because they are attributable to the absence of such training. Naturally this pronouncement fails to account for several factors. Many businesses, the primary repositories of trained managers, routinely encounter problems no amount of management training can solve. Furthermore, higher education fared quite well for centuries before the term 'management' was applied to business and before management courses found their way into college catalogues.

The transference of the total quality vocabulary, complete with the identification of students as customers, from business to education occurred when widespread problems with American education gained public attention. This crisis reached its peak soon after similar problems were diagnosed in American businesses. The history of the total quality movement in education, therefore, represents an extension of W. Edwards Deming's total quality methods beyond corporate settings (Dobyns & Crawford-Mason, 1994). Such an extension comes as no surprise. Cries for educational reform sounded at a time convenient for

importing the language of quality. In 1983, the National Commission on Excellence in Education published *A Nation at Risk*, a report that lamented the poor quality of American elementary and secondary education. By the time this report and a host of similar studies had been compiled, the Deming methods had begun to attract attention in the United States. Deming's philosophy for corporate improvement, better known as Total Quality Management or the acronym TQM in its American incarnations, had enabled inefficient or crumbling organizations in post-World War II Japan to recover and eventually outcompete many of their American counterparts by the seventies. American corporations jumped on the quality bandwagon so they could restore their competitive position vis-a-vis the Japanese, an ironic turn considering that Deming took his methods to Japan after they had been spurned by American corporations. The pressures of competition—among colleges and between the United States and foreign nations—resounded in educational circles in about 1990, approximately a decade later than in American businesses (Coate, 1993) and after highly critical reports such as *A Nation at Risk* had become too commonplace to ignore. By the early nineties, TQM had become "the rage" in higher education (Fisher, 1993, p. 15). Responding to market pressures similar to those American corporations had faced, educational reformers saw an urgent need for America not to fall further behind other industrialized nations in basic skills. The remedy seemed obvious. Problems such as inefficiency, losing competitive advantages over other nations (especially Japan), and dissatisfaction with performance closely resembled complaints leveled against American businesses. Similar problems called for similar solutions, so the conclusion had all the

earmarks of inevitability. If TQM could reform American business, it could generate analogous improvements in American education.

Customer orientation forms a cornerstone of TQM philosophy, be it Deming's system or any of its permutations. Quality is defined in terms of customer satisfaction: the customer's judgment of quality not only determines how quality is measured but how it is defined in the first place (Peters, 1987; Fenwick, 1992). In higher education, the vocabulary of TQM brings assumptions of equivalencies: students are customers or consumers, and educational institutions should apply principles of customer service gleaned from businesses. Given the success of TQM in reducing defects in manufacturing and in improving customer service, the question arises: "If we can do it for widgets, why not for students?" (Brigham, 1993, p. 47) The record of TQM's effects in service industries has been spottier than in manufacturing, so some commentators have urged caution in applying total quality concepts to education (Brigham, 1993; Keller, 1992; Fisher, 1993). The issue of how well the language and methods of corporate management apply to higher education assumes great importance, especially as colleges and universities face financial straits and competition similar to those plaguing American businesses. Whether TQM should extend to higher education has been considered "the most pressing question of the TQM movement" (Keller, 1992, p. 50). Regardless of its effectiveness, TQM terminology has begun to infuse higher education.

The treatment of students as customers does have its advantages. There is little question that many educational institutions suffer from territoriality and lack of

accountability. Departments often become compartments, each pursuing its own objectives, duplicating efforts and wasting energy, oblivious or contemptuous of students. Almost every student can tell depressing tales of being ignored or treated as a nuisance rather than as the cornerstone of education. If an emphasis on quality is geared to improving cooperation among all stakeholders in education, from trustees to faculty to students, its objective is certainly worthwhile. Most important, investing students with a definite role—one more respectful and central than "necessary evil"—recognizes them as participants in the educational process instead of passive recipients of whatever the institution decides to dish out. Every day, employees of colleges and universities should recognize their obligation to serve others (Marchese, 1993), be they colleagues who need more efficiently processed purchase orders or students who appreciate their phone calls being returned promptly. The goal of total quality appears laudable, indeed incontestable (Fisher, 1993). Does a management-rooted philosophy of education represent the best route to improving educational quality? The methods and implications of TQM terminology deserve closer inspection.

TQM certainly can improve some aspects of higher education, namely those that provide specific services to students. The areas of institutions that conduct discrete business-like transactions—e.g., student services, registration, food services, maintenance—do seem amenable to streamlining and improvement via TQM methods. TQM implementers at colleges and universities often recommend starting quality initiatives with services such as maintenance and data processing because they have close analogues in

business (Coate, 1991). Not surprisingly, these environments most closely resemble the business settings to which total quality was originally applied. The success stories of TQM in education often deal with these areas where performance can be measured easily and benchmark standards are readily available (Beaver, 1994).

When management philosophies enter teaching and learning, the transfer from business may be rougher. The central matter to consider is whether envisioning students as customers has advantages in educational settings where the students participate in the learning process. Education, unlike individual transactions such as registering for classes, involves an ongoing process heavily dependent on the student's willingness to participate in learning (Beaver, 1994). After considering the implications and assumptions of configuring students as customers, a larger point looms. Why should the corporate world generate the linguistic framework for educational processes? Phrased a bit differently, analysis of the "student as consumer" perspective might spark renewed interest in refining the definition of students. Education then could proceed by conceptualizing students as *students* rather than recasting them in the image of business.

The Role of Metaphors in Educational Practice

The metaphoric turn in discussing education is not a last resort but an inevitable result of trying to concretize an abstract and diffuse process. While physical laborers—factory workers, for example—can point to an object they played a role in creating, repairing, or altering, educators have a difficult time identifying what they actually do. True, we can show sets of "before" and "after" measures of achievement, but that fails to

satisfy legislatures and school boards who demand to see process as well as product. How do we respond when the legislature in a southeastern state has suggested that college faculty account for every hour of a work week that must equal forty hours in one office or in a classroom? Reading books, counseling students, and myriad other activities within and beyond the classroom need to be placed in a framework that gives them an analogue in non-academic settings. When many of those who control the educational purse strings can conceive of the educational process only in relation to contexts more akin to business settings, metaphors rooted in business naturally become congenial. Metaphoric renderings of students connect the sometimes unfamiliar academic world with environments more customary to the parents, legislators, and trustees who make decisions affecting education but do not have regular, direct exposure to academic life. The challenge is facilitate comprehension while maintaining fidelity to what actually occurs in the educational process.

Many academic institutions and administrators have chosen a metaphor originating in business: to consider students as customers and treat them accordingly. The infusion of such language into academics seems inevitable, especially given the increasing pressures to make programs and departments more cost-effective, compete successfully for scarce resources such as the best students, generate grants, reduce deficits, and maximize efficient use of personnel. The choice of metaphors, however, is propitious. All descriptive metaphors are implicitly prescriptive. The normative side of rendering students as

consumers arises because the metaphor structures how to frame the educational process itself. The standard way to talk about students thus shades into the standard for action.

When Kenneth Burke selected metaphor as the first of four "master tropes" (1969, p. 503), his terminological choice was significant. A trope can qualify as a master not simply from its frequency of use, but for its ability to direct how to approach reality. If those who use a particular metaphor recognize its prescriptive power, its capability of evoking connotations and shaping orientations, then that metaphor serves as a beneficent master instead of a tyrannical overlord.

Lest comfort be taken too readily, metaphor the master trope can enslave its users. Susan Sontag cautions against undue subservience to metaphors of illness, for example. She recommends a "liberation from" metaphors that are so ingrained they master imagination, occluding the inventive capacity to adapt language as a creative response to—and reshaping of— reality (1990, p. 4). The tyranny of the master trope surfaces when it becomes naturalized as the "normal" way to describe reality. At that point, a metaphor can restrict perception instead of expand it. Then a metaphor operates as a restraint rather than as a resource.

This essay sounds a note of warning about the overly enthusiastic grafting of language from one discursive realm onto another. Interactionist theories of metaphor point out that a metaphor's cognitive value relies on the metaphor maintaining a "tensional truth" (Casenave, 1982, p. 144) between (1) the similarity shared by the metaphoric frame—"customer"—and the subject that is the focus—"student"—and (2) the foreignness or cognitive distance

between the concepts combined metaphorically (Ricoeur, 1977; Black, 1962). The balance between similarity and tension is crucial for a metaphor to have cognitive value (Hausman, 1981). If the similarity between concepts is too great, then the metaphor is unenlightening and serves as nothing more than a synonymous substitution for the previous description (Hausman, 1981). If the conceptual distance is too great, then the metaphor degenerates into a riddle or paradox. For example, "leg of a table" fails to provide insight about legs or tables because modern usage has rendered the term "leg" interchangeable for furniture or bipeds. On the other hand, "modem intestine" provokes bewilderment in virtually any context because alimentary processes and computer hardware share too few characteristics to support ready metaphoric linkages. For the metaphoric equivalence of students with customers to be informative, it must reveal the limits of the analogy. By knowing how far the metaphor can be taken, the terminology becomes far less pernicious because, as Sontag points out, users of the metaphor recognize its domain of applicability and are less likely to accept it uncritically.

The language of consumerism should not be grafted willy-nilly onto the practice of education. According to studies of how metaphors are processed, such an unproblematic overlay would fail to provoke the necessary cognitive "recoil" to examine the various dimensions of the relationship between students and customers (Osborn & Ehninger, 1962, p. 231). Like organ transplants, however, imported terminology can be rejected by the host. In this case the host is education, and the rejection is not so much negative reactions from educators as the fundamental dissimilarities that persist between education and business

despite metaphoric alliances. Metaphorically applying the concept of customer to students represents far more than a simple overlay or grafting. Cognitively rich metaphors do not arise from merely substituting one term (e.g., *customer*) for another (e.g., *student*). Instead of simply grafting the concept of customer onto that of student, the metaphorically conjoined ideas intersect in some ways and diverge in others. The fundamental point is that any conceptual importation of a tenor, or descriptive term (i.e., *customer*), also carries with it some of the historical roots, connotations, and uses from its realm of origination. This essay contributes to the thesis that the incompatibilities between the realm of business and the realm of education render the application of consumer metaphors to education problematic. A metaphoric predication is not an absolute identification of one thing as another, but the juxtaposition of concepts whose dissimilarities as well as similarities invite contemplation (Marias, 1967). Pointing out the divergences between consumerism and education reveals the complexities attendant to metaphoric construction. A lesson can be learned in the case of treating students as customers: metaphors are much more than mere terminological borrowings that replace one field's vocabulary with that of another.

If metaphors represent "a structural change in a field of meanings" (Gerhart & Russell, 1984, p. 95), then the configuration of students as customers has significant consequences for how the relationships among students, between students and teachers, and between educational institutions and students are conceived. More concretely, construing students as customers bears implications for structuring curricula and for the ways the entire educational process is treated. The metaphor suggests "value systems and world views which need to be

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articulated and analysed and, where necessary, challenged" (Baldwin, 1994, p. 132). Understanding students as customers represents more than an ancillary to historical events. Metaphoric choices have consequences and historically specific underlying assumptions.

The choice of consumer-oriented terminology certainly was a response to the success that businesses had with a customer-centered approach to improving efficiency and profitability. It would be hasty and inaccurate, however, to assume that such a response proves that metaphoric choices are incidental to the historical events that give rise to terminological shifts. Language and the social environment interact synergistically. Language influences the way social reality is perceived and approached. Metaphors are not mere by-products of history but have consequences for subsequent understanding. In short, a metaphoric configuration can instigate "a structural change which demands that other meanings and understandings have to be changed in the wake of the metaphor" (Gerhart & Russell, 1984, p. 119). The student-as-customer metaphor certainly gains significance from its historical conjuncture with the total quality management philosophy. The question is how the future of educational practice might be affected once placed within this linguistic framework.

Metaphoric choices have consequences. Insofar as they influence how experience is structured and interpreted, metaphors are not value-neutral (Sederberg, 1984). Metaphors can generate cognitive insights, but they can constrict as well as expand interpretive possibilities. Once a metaphor becomes literalized, the creative act of blending categories becomes a restrictive understanding of one category only in terms of

another. The metaphoric transference of some business principles to education might improve the educational process. Who could argue with improving service or with taking the needs of students into account? On the other hand, the business mindset can render education a mere commodity if students are understood solely as customers who must be pleased without exerting any effort in the process. A useful metaphoric perspective of thinking of students *as if* they were customers can narrow to an understanding that students *are* customers—and nothing more.

The Elusive Customer

Before determining how to satisfy the customer, it must be determined who qualifies as the customer of education. Difficulties persist in identifying which customers should be satisfied and what might count as satisfaction. A major barrier to implementing TQM programs in educational settings has been that "colleges and universities have no clear understanding of who the customers, either internal or external, are" (Winter, 1991, p. 59). Quality management principles and methods offer little help here. Identification of students as the customers of higher education has been called "incomplete" because, since education affects society at large, "the ultimate consumers or users of education are the national and international communities" (Rinehart, 1993, p. 57). In striving to maximize customer satisfaction, institutions are encouraged "to stretch the standard definition of 'customer' to include all persons or organizations who are affected" by education (Seymour, 1993, p. 48). The broad scope of customers is consonant with Juran's (1992, p.

44) definition of customers as "anyone who is impacted" by an organization's success or failure in attaining its goals.

Exactly how far removed from the educational process must someone be to qualify as a customer? TQM theorists approach this question by distinguishing internal from external customers. The internal customers consist of people within the institution who receive products or services provided by other members of the organization (Sallis, 1993). For example, the professor of Advanced Public Speaking is a customer of the professor who teaches Basic Public Speaking. The professor who teaches the prerequisite course supplies students to the professor in the advanced course. External customers are equivalent to the end users of a product or service (Fenwick, 1992; Tomlin, 1994). Immediately the internal/external distinction poses problems because their terminology is inconsistent. When considering internal customers, the students become products or merchandise passed from provider to customer. Students are considered "a human resource that is being developed for the external customers of education" (Rinehart, 1993, p. 62). Pleasing the internal customer in this case would mean satisfying the professor, while pleasing the external customer could bypass or contradict the professor's interests. As for external customers, exactly who counts as an end user: those who receive the education, those who pay for it, or those affected by its applications? Depending on the context, the definition of the customer shifts. In a single set of interactions, the roles that members of an educational institution assume are so intertwined that "everyone in the organization is both a supplier and a customer" (Sherr & Lozier, 1991, p. 8).

Even the proponents of TQM recognize that several parties may qualify as the customer in educational settings. "An institution of higher education is a complex web of relationships, where any given person or office is both a customer and a supplier" (Cornesky et al., 1992, p. 70). Such ambiguity would present few problems in everyday relationships, where interactions are multi-faceted. In the arena of management, however, the dictum to satisfy the customer becomes especially difficult to obey if different groups of consumers have different needs and desires. Which categories of customers take precedence over others? Juran recommends classifying the different categories of customers in order to "allocate priorities and resources based on the relative importance of the customers and the impacts" (1992, p. 57). Despite the need "to decide whose satisfaction should be measured" (Cornesky et al., 1992, p. 88), the identification of customers still does not resolve whose opinions should receive highest priority. Ideally everyone's needs are met and customer satisfaction becomes universal: "For success, the varying standards of all customers must be met" (Townsend & Gebhardt, 1986, p. 22). Meeting everyone's standards, however, requires negotiation and compromise because not everyone shares the same definition of what constitutes a high quality education. Universal satisfaction presumes that standards and expectations of quality will be uniform for all constituencies and that none of these needs will conflict. Utilitarian ethics As the student population becomes increasingly diverse, the probability increases that some groups of students may have desires, needs, or interests that conflict with other groups (Beaver, 1994). Without a clearly defined method for prioritizing the needs of different

types of customers, TQM could degenerate into a reinforcement of the values and procedures identified by the existing administrative hierarchy (Parker & Slaughter, 1994). Quality methods have no procedure for resolving inter-group conflicts because they assume that a consensual definition of quality can and will be reached. Juran's solution in manufacturing contexts is to concentrate on the "vital few" customers, those who purchase the most, while the "useful many" or smaller ticket item purchasers receive less personal attention (1992, p. 57). How might an analogous procedure be implemented in educational settings? Are the vital few the students whose parents donate the largest sums to the institution? It remains unclear how to prioritize which students deserve the most attention, and the decision assumes a cynically pecuniary—not to mention selfish—air if based on financial considerations.

The TQM model correctly identifies students as stakeholders in educational decisions. On the other hand, they are not the only stakeholders, and sometimes the interests of students must take a back seat to the needs of the community. Identifying the students and prospective employers as the customers of education, Bill Creech (1994) notes that employers have pressed far more aggressively than students for educational reforms. Initiatives for educational improvement have arisen despite little explicit student dissatisfaction and activism. One group of customers (i.e., employers) has taken precedence over another (i.e., students), although the satisfaction of needs expressed by prospective employers is proving to be in the best interest of students as well.

Under the TQM framework, students operate as a market force to which educational institutions must adapt in order to survive. Such a portrayal of students, however, invests them with a misleadingly inflated sense of empowerment. Far from autonomously constituting the market force, students and the educational administration too often find themselves at the mercy of forces they neither originated nor control. For example, the state of South Carolina is in the process of implementing a five percent budget cut to all state institutions, including colleges and universities. To say that students drive the market under such conditions misleads students into thinking they have far more clout than they actually do.

Finally, even if the definition of customer could be settled, would student recommendations be suitable for undertaking policy initiatives? First, the verbal expression of needs might not match actual or perceived needs (Juran, 1992). For example, an expressed desire for more exciting classes might mask much more precise requests for more audiovisual equipment, faculty with better communication skills, different textbooks, or shorter duration of classes—or none of these. Student input must be operationalized before it becomes usable. Otherwise changes might occur that have little relationship to alterations that students actually wanted.

Second, market researchers recognize a fundamental gap between the desires that customers express and whether those desires can be translated into specific actions (Finch, 1994). Suppose, for example, that students express the desire for more classes to be offered in the evening. This request permits several responses, many of which the same

students might find objectionable: offering fewer courses during the day, hiring more faculty and thus increasing tuition, increasing the length of each class, etc. Quality advocates often assume that customer needs spell clear mandates. Actually the customer's expressed desires might reflect ideal outcomes but bear little resemblance to a request for specific action.

Is the Customer Always Right?

The literature on TQM in educational settings equivocates when discussing "a user-based definition of quality" (Seymour, 1993, p. 43). Terminology shifts between customer *wants* and customer *needs*, as if these concepts were synonymous. On the rare occasions when needs and desires are distinguished, they tend to remain undefined (as in Sashkin & Kiser, 1993). This terminological confusion infuses the core of TQM philosophy. Juran, one of the original figures in the quality movement, defines customer *needs* as "those *desires* of customers which can be met by the product features of goods and services" (1992, p. 505; emphasis added). The same ambivalence persists in applications to education. For example, one TQM how-to manual for higher education claims that the central concept of quality is "giving customers what they want." In the same paragraph, the language subtly shifts to the argument that "need-satisfaction is the Holy Grail" (Seymour, 1993, p. 42). Another TQM guidebook claims: "The primary focus of any educational institution should be the *needs* and views of its learners." Six pages later, the same work states: "Quality is what the customer *wants* and not what the institution decides is best for them" (Sallis, 1992, pp. 33, 39; emphasis added). A third discussion of TQM in

educational settings advises organizing work "around the needs and preferences of *customers*" (Marchese, 1993, p. 13; emphasis in original), assuming that requirements and desires always coincide. Such equivocation has consequences far more significant then mere confusion.

If quality is defined in terms of student-customer *wants*, the vision of quality is short-sighted indeed. A student's immediate desires often consist of very short-term and self-serving goals: to pass a course, to graduate, to learn concepts and techniques immediately applicable to employment. Tom Peters issues a succinct caveat regarding perceptions of quality: "Caution: The Customer's Perception of Quality Can Be Perverse" (1987, p. 102). Most college classes have at least some students who can identify quality as an intellectually challenging assignment, for instance, yet refuse it when offered (Beaver, 1993). Catering only to what the student wants at the moment presumes that in their expression of desires, students are fully informed (Sallis, 1992) and can express their desires unequivocally. The TQM literature recognizes that students' "perceptions of quality change as they progress through the institution and their experience and confidence grows" (Sallis, 1992, p. 39). Given this fact, should a totally green freshman's perception of a good education shape the education he receives? One of the reasons students seek an education is to clarify their needs and desires or to establish their priorities. Because their judgment may not yet have matured, "students cannot be considered the primary customer of education for the purpose of educational quality, for this simple reason: students have no conception of what they must learn; they are, after all, students" (Rinehart, 1993, p. 59).

Students may not yet be able to determine whether their long-term needs are being met (Green, 1994b), especially if they have been poorly prepared for college and have had few encounters with demanding coursework or rigorous teachers. As mentioned previously, students' "needs and desires may not match" (Rinehart, 1993, p. 59). The question now arises as to who might be in the best position to judge whether quality is present, especially in instructional settings.

If the perceptions of more mature students are used as benchmarks, then one group of customers is beholden to the educational vision of a different group. The question then becomes: "Which customer should the academic community listen to?" (Beaver, 1994, p. 112) If one constituency's desires dominate, then a hegemonic group of customers replaces the overly directive institution. Supposing that the determination of educational priorities depends on student input (Finch, 1994), do definitions of quality arise from a simple head count of whatever the majority wants? If the responses from students are to be weighted, who determines which constituencies receive the most weight?

The objection might arise that the preceding description of student desires is more a caricature than a faithful rendition. Indeed, most students do take education quite seriously. If students have not yet clarified their needs and desires, that condition by no means renders them "mere" students whose concerns carry no weight. The problem is that even the most serious students may have insufficient frames of reference to determine their educational preferences in relation to some larger context: careers not yet begun, families not yet started, communities not yet entered. Students lack the expertise to judge exactly

what constitutes quality in a particular subject (Beaver, 1994), although they certainly have the competence to recognize degrees of courtesy, promptness, and reliability that generalize across disciplines.

The equation of satisfied wants with quality commits what could be termed the *hedonistic fallacy:* a faulty equivalence between wants and goods. People naturally want many things that may not be in their long-term best interest. Plato (1953, III.402e), sharply distinguishing pleasure from virtue, was quick to warn against equating the satisfaction of desire with doing what is best. Phrased in terms more adapted to the marketplace, "what is 'right' cannot be defined in any terms other than what will sell" (Baldwin, 1994, p. 129). While such a categorical definition might qualify as an overstatement, it does highlight the conflation of popularity with merit. A confusion between short-term pleasure and long-term good becomes especially likely with statements such as: "Delighting the customers is the purpose of TQM" (Sallis, 1992, p. 126). The equivalence of quality with pleasing the customer works only if the customer's conception of quality is mature and consonant with the goals of education per se. John Stuart Mill explains this stipulation in a justly celebrated remark:

> The test of quality is the preference given by those who are acquainted with both [higher and lower kinds of happiness]. Socrates would rather choose to be Socrates dissatisfied than to be a pig satisfied. The pig probably would not, but then the pig knows only one side of the question; Socrates knows both (1965, p. 343).

An analogy from medicine further illustrates the difference. The sick person may want to eat candy instead of take medicine, but does that mean such a desire should be indulged at the expense of health? TQM uncritically accepts the student-customer's subjective perception of quality as unassailable (Seymour, 1993). The educational system therefore must adapt to perceptions that might be unrealistic, irrelevant, or not fully developed because "the customer is always right." Ironically, this version of staying close to the customer can buy immediate satisfaction at the expense of the customer's own long-term best interest.

Despite problems associated with giving customers what they want, the fulfillment of needs fares no better. Needs, in the context of education, consist of the minimum necessary human elements that must be satisfied to retain the student. If a student's needs are not satisfied, if she lacks what she *must* have to continue, then the student does not return or does not graduate. Not coincidentally, student services TQM programs are deemed successful if they increase student retention. Need satisfaction, therefore, is oriented toward baseline performance, providing students with what they cannot do without. Fulfillment of wants, on the other hand, guides educational practice to best case scenarios as defined by the students. While needs take the form of bare necessities, wants have the character of higher standards or ideals.

It would seem that needs, far more than desires, would be intersubjective, recognizable and specifiable by all the stakeholders in education. If needs are the basic essentials, then they can be enumerated not only by the students but by faculty,

administrators, parents, boards of trustees, the local community, alumni, and prospective employers. Recognized needs tend to be long-term requirements and as such may be recognized only in the long run, after the thrill of college social activities has faded. In educational policy, need satisfaction often has taken the form of emphasizing basic skills that students might not *want* to stress despite their later recognition of *needing* these skills. Fulfillment of needs, however, raises serious questions regarding the relationship between quality and excellence. Gearing education to needs places the focus on fundamental requirements that might prove necessary for learning but resemble minimal requirements more than ultimate objectives. For example, a student certainly should expect everyone in an educational setting to treat her with courtesy and respect. Such a requirement, both for the student and for the institution, constitutes a core assumption instead of a benchmark for outstanding achievement. Meeting a student's needs, which could be defined simply as the levels of self-preservation that occupy the lower levels of Maslow's hierarchy, is necessary but not sufficient for assuring quality (Horton, 1981; Sallis, 1992).

Aside from failing to encourage better teaching or learning, the idea of quality in relation to student-customers is ideologically naive. "User-defined" definitions of quality are not innocent evaluations of a product or service, totally devoid of social contexts and political agendas. People naturally like what gives them pleasure, and all too often pleasure arises from encountering confirmation of pre-existing beliefs. A perception of high-quality education, therefore, may amount to a reinforcement of the very prejudices and provincialism that learning is designed to overcome. It is no coincidence that state

legislatures assail the quality of public education when they encounter courses and curricula that challenge "mainstream" political sentiments, with the mainstream defined as the positions of the legislators themselves. According to such a standard, "quality" education, far from challenging students by exposing them to the lively marketplace of different ideas, constricts young minds by insulating them from intellectual novelty, avoiding different viewpoints, and stifling innovative departures from tradition and authority. In this dystopian vision of educational quality, educational institutions mirror existent beliefs. The better the quality of education, the more precisely it reflects "the way things oughtta be" as defined by particular political interests.

Education as Management and as Mentoring

Despite the varying definitions of quality in TQM programs, all quality initiatives share the stipulation that quality be based on fulfilling customer-defined needs. "There is no room for competing definitions of quality" (Green, 1994a, p. 116), such as the needs of the community or the desires of parents. Management models derived from manufacturing apply poorly to education. The process of education resembles some aspects of other services, but it is ill-suited to vocabularies originating in product-oriented industries. Unlike manufacturing, education involves those it serves and provides intangible skills more than specific products (Green, 1994a).

Treating students as customers omits some of the most vital components of the educational process. The concept of mentoring has no place in determinations of quality. Mentoring, which involves a student having a model to emulate, encompasses much more

than satisfaction of existing needs or desires. When connected with learning values, the presence of models becomes crucial. The mentor nurtures the student's love of learning, thereby stimulating dissatisfaction with ignorance and a craving for new knowledge. Until the student perceives a need to learn, her judgment of quality education might have little to do with its substance.

The personal tutelage aspect of the student-teacher relationship has no analogue in management (Green, 1994b). Peters (1987) comes close to describing the mentoring ideal when he discusses champions who advocate innovation and flexibility in corporations. He does not, however, explain the process of being taken under someone's wing, the personal attention that lies at the core of education. A familiar phenomenon to students and teachers, mentoring often is synonymous with high quality education. Training, a term ironically shared by animal tamers and human resource executives, is a unidirectional relationship. The trainer trains the trainee, who receives the information and performs the task. Mentoring, however, exemplifies the "nourishing guidance . . . that make[s] the development of competence of one person a joint accomplishment" (Krippendorf, 1995, p. 122). Any teacher can attest that the educational relationship frequently entails the teacher learning from students, an experience unaccounted for by management models of training.

Although fostering quality in education sounds incontestable, transferring management conceptions of quality to educational environments poses serious problems. Difficulties with transposing terminology from business to education run deeper than the words themselves. Since the choice of metaphors reflects and shapes reactions to social

reality, superficial adjustments of terms will not shed the implicit connotations outlined in this paper. While switching to the student-as-customer metaphor was recognized at one university as "not just a change in semantics, but a change of culture," resistance to the terminology was countered by a simplistic semantic switch: "We often substitute the word clients for customers" (Coate, 1993, p. 315). If the client metaphor differs substantially from the customer orientation, then that terminological change deserves attention. If not, then the alteration has only cosmetic value, since it retains the management connotations that run counter to the goals and process of education. A primary source for TQM principles reveals that clients and customers are not interchangeable. Clients are "those who buy the products" and qualify as one, albeit vital, "category of customers . . . [and] are only a small percentage of the persons impacted" (Juran, 1992, pp. 44-45). Some of those who object to treating students as customers are reacting to the concept's implications and assumptions. This essay suggests that such objections have substantive bases that challenge core premises of TQM. Disagreement with the principle of student-customers should not be interpreted as a knee-jerk reaction to words themselves.

TQM has been implemented successfully at several universities. The tables of results, however, consistently omit any comments about the quality of education within and beyond the classroom. Money has been saved, procedures have been streamlined. As for teaching and learning, however, treating students as customers carries mixed blessings. Even if students can be understood as customers in some contexts, they deserve more from educators than immediate gratification.

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